

Feminist Visions and Human Rights in the Academy

Valerie Elverton Dixon, Ph.D.

October 6, 2005

## Hell

Let us consider Hell.

We have annihilated Hell. We have pushed it aside, ignored it to death, allowed it to fade from our psychological and spiritual selves. We have theorized it into oblivion. We have turned it into poetry and a party complete with barbecue and the blues, with Stagger Lee presiding. An eternal lake of fire wherein evil human beings suffer extreme torture no longer gives us comfort as evidence of a cosmic universal justice. Hell is no longer useful by people in power to scare an ignorant majority into suffering the hardships of their lives without complaint. It can no longer ensure conformity. Hell has lost its power of governance over human behavior. This cooling of the raging fire of Hell until it is only glowing embers is relatively recent. The history of Hell is long, and its power to rule human behavior through a kind of spiritual and psychological terrorism makes the logic of a war on terror thinkable.

Let us consider the history of Hell.

In her book, The History of Hell, Alice K Turner chronicles the mythological, theological, philosophical and

aesthetic evolution of the concept of Hell as a locus for eternal torture and damnation. From our earliest known human civilizations, the human imagination has imagined an afterlife. In much of this imagining, the afterlife was connected with rewards and punishments. The ancient Egyptians thought that after death a person's heart was weighed on the scales of Maat, the goddess of truth. If your heart sunk below the weight of a feather this was evidence of its sinfulness and a little monster Ammit ate it thereby causing you to cease to exist (64). If your heart did not outweigh the feather, your work was to transform your soul into a bird or some other animal that represents rejuvenation.

In Persia, Zoroastrianism postulated a dualistic cosmology in conflict with itself. A good god lived above with angels who warred against an evil lord of lies who lived under the earth in darkness, filth and death. "Their conflict is the history of the world, and the object of the conflict is the soul of man" (18). The dualism of Manichaeism is related to the Zoroastrian cosmology. The Roman poet Virgil gives us a Hell with "... howling dogs, clammy caves, noxious fumes, earthquakes, eerie cries" (37).

The ancient Jewish imagination takes us to the grave, the pit, a garbage dump. Some believed in the resurrection of the body while others did not. Satan was an adversary. In early Christianity the Gnostics thought this world and this life were Hell. The Apostle Paul writes of life and death; Peter and James write of future punishment; Mark writes of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit as an eternal sin. (Mark 3:29 -30) Matthew reports Jesus warning of Hell, the day of judgment, outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth; he writes of eternal fire and of everlasting punishment. The book of Revelation sees torment with fire and sulfur, the smoke of which will rise forever. (Revelation 14: 10,11) Revelation also sees a lake of fire where cowards, the faithless, the polluted, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars will die the second death. (Revelation 21:8)

Origin, one of the early church fathers, reasoned that Hell could not be a place of eternal torment. Such would negate the salvific power of Jesus. For Christ to reign over all creation, the devil himself must emerge from the refining fires of Hell to return to his angelic self. (77)

Three hundred years after his death, however, this doctrine was ruled anathema by the church, and Origin was excommunicated.

In the Middle Ages, Dante gave us his version of Hell in The Divine Comedy; the church created purgatory, a place on the outskirts of Hell that a soul could at some point leave and enter into heaven. Protestantism rejected purgatory, and both Martin Luther and John Calvin accepted the notion of predestination, the idea that some were created to live life, accept salvation and go to heaven while others were not. During the counter reformation, Jesuits altered the image of Hell. They kept the fire, evicted the monsters, and added urban squalor (113).

In Milton's Paradise Lost, free will is primary, not predestination. And with Newtonian physics and Enlightenment philosophy Hell loses much of its meaning. Turner writes:

What after all is the point of Hell after the Last Judgement? Punishment can be deterrent, corrective, curative, or vindictive. Hell was certainly a deterrent: even those who doubted privately felt it was a useful concept for others, especially for the lower classes. (194)

Diderot challenged its logic in the face of the idea of a merciful God and the salvific sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Later Freudian psychology would change our vocabulary and our thinking from anxiety about sin to

anxiety about the struggle between Id, Ego, and Super-ego (240). Today Universalist theology resurrects Origin and understands Hell and eternal damnation as incompatible with a God of Love and Justice.

So the terrorism of Hell is defeated. We have annihilated Hell. Yet, while we have quenched the fires of eternal damnation, Hell still exists. Now we face hell on earth. War, famine, disease, ignorance, exploitation, the hell of living with too little, the hell of living with too much, are still with us. With no eternal hell to frighten us into submission, people who want to gain and maintain power keep us frightened of each other. The Zoroastrian, Christian, Manichaean division of good versus evil still persists. I say that this duality is the primary reason for hell on earth.

A them and us logic, a logic that becomes a theology of good versus evil locked in a battle to the death until one or the other is doomed to annihilation, doomed to a hell of eternal torment, or doomed to submission, makes terrorism and the terrorism of war morally thinkable.

And in the good versus evil divide, woman has all too often been excluded from the good and included in the evil. Far too often in the phenomenon of religion, woman has been cast in the role of the door that allows sin and evil and chaos into the world. Woman and her association with the mysteries of sex and birth, birth that ultimately leads to death, is a force that must be contained, controlled, even negated.

Religion, when it claims to assert its role as opposition to sin, evil, and chaos defined as woman wants to control her. This is the case when religion falls primarily into the hands of men who thus imagine a creator God, a God of salvation, goodness and order as exclusively male. Thus woman is excluded from the God self. This is a crucifixion of the goddess; this denies woman her divinity; she cannot be the image of God; she cannot be a vessel of the breath of God.

It is important to resurrect the goddess in all of her mythological, theological, and ethical glory so that

we can begin to quench the fires of hell on earth. It is important for scholars of religion to envision divinity in female form so that women will understand their own divinity inside of their humanity and thus accept the moral challenge of not only declaring the human rights of woman, but of insisting upon them, working for them. We can start this work with Hel herself. Like Hades the place takes its name from the person. The goddess Hel is a Scandinavian goddess of the dead. Let us imagine Hel as the female divine that, like the Holy Spirit, is with us in our sufferings. Let us imagine that all of the hells on earth are still places of holy and righteous possibilities. Let us imagine our sojourn in hell as a time of tempering and refinement from which we emerge brilliant and strong.

At some points in the Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary assumed the role of redeemer. She was understood as one who would go into hell and set the captives free. So let us remember Mary and the obligation that is ours to go into hell and to set the captives free. This means that when we recognize our own divinity, our female god selves that we have an obligation to bring an end to war, famine, disease, ignorance and exploitation.

Now why do we need to restore the divinity of woman in order to do human rights work? Is not our humanity enough? Is not humanity enough reason to name and work toward human rights for women and men? Yes. Our humanity is enough, but our divinity creates a more profound demand. Divinity demands an eye that sees both transcendence and immanence. Divinity demands that we understand our human ontology, our being, our is-ness as a creative and a re-creative force. We are co-creators with the Divine in the work of continuing creation. The work of human rights is the work of extinguishing the various and sundry hells on earth. The work of religion, the work of religere, the binding together of the human to the Divine, to all of creation, and the human to itself also is the work of binding us to the past, the present and the future. This is the work of the

human/divine, of the divine/human.

So much suffering in this world is invisible and the suffering we see is often overwhelming to the point where we long for escape. We are exhausted. Our humanity, our flesh and blood selves gets tired and gets sick and gets busted and disgusted. However, the Divine Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Goddess force exists outside of the flesh and is inexhaustible. We return to her for sustenance and rest so that we have the energy to continue the work. So, it is with deep gratitude and a sense of our own responsibility that we know Hel and Mary, Minerva, Aphrodite, Athena, Pele, Demeter, Sedna, Changing Woman, Artemis, Spider Woman, Hathor, Inanna, Lillith, Eagle Woman, Kuan Yin, Gaia, White Shell Woman, The Sphinx, Themis, Bast, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Kaltes, Flora, Morgan Le Fay, Medusa, Eve, Psyche, Kali, Lalita, Valkyrie, Ix Chel, Selene, Venus, Hina, Lady of the Lake, Diana, Epona, Fortuna, Persephone, Ishtar, Hera, Isis, Oshun, Aja, Ala, Xi Hon, Mo Ye, Loa, Erzulie, Nut, Ma'at. When we know who they are, we will know who we are. We can annihilate hell on earth.

#### Works Cited

Turner, Alice, K. The History of Hell. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993.